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SOME PROTESTANT ATTITUDES
ON THE LABOR QUESTION
IN 1886

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUB-
MITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE
DIVINITY SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

1942

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SOME PROTESTANT ATTITUDES ON THE LABOR QUESTION IN 1886

CARL WARREN GRIFFITHS

Chicago, Illinois

An important development in 1886 was the interest which the religious forces of the country showed in the problem of capital and labor. It was an interest that was not confined to a few socially minded religious leaders. The religious press, the pulpit and church gatherings showed a deep concern in the relations of workingmen with their employers. It was a natural concern because it was a year of labor unrest that was symbolized in the public mind by the phenomenal growth of the Knights of Labor and by numerous strikes and boycotts.¹

Some editors of religious papers were glad to see this display of interest and hoped that it would lead to a solution of the labor problem through methods of arbitration and co-operation.² *Zion's Herald* believed that the labor question was becoming more and more threatening and thought that its solution would come in part through the application of Christian justice and benevolence.³ The editor of the *Churchman* declared that the sermons preached on the labor problem had shown that the spirit of Christian socialism was widespread in the church, and stated with pride that the secular press was amazed at the wisdom shown in the pulpits and in religious journals. The times had called for an outspoken development of a Christ-like love for the brethren, and the church had shown itself equal to the occasion.⁴ The *Christian Advocate*, speaking from the quantitative standpoint, declared that

1 For a survey of the nature and extent of labor troubles see "Report of the Secretary of the Interior: Being Part of the Message and Documents Communicated to the Two Houses of Congress at the Beginning of the First Session of the Fiftieth Congress," *House Executive Document*, No. 1, Part 5, Vol. v, 50 Congress, 1 Session (Washington, 1887); and "Investigation of Labor Troubles in Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, and Illinois," *House Report*, No. 4174, 49 Congress, 2 Session (Washington, 1887).

2 *Northwestern Christian Advocate* (Chicago), December 1, 1886; *Central Christian Advocate* (St. Louis), February 24, 1886.

3 *Zion's Herald* (Boston), March 17, 1886.

4 *Churchman* (New York), June 26, 1886.

within a "comparatively short time" it had published thirty-four articles on the problem of capital and labor.⁵

It was a period when many churchmen were worried for fear that the church was losing its hold upon the masses. Thus, the Chicago Presbytery showed concern over the need of evangelization "in our destitute population, especially as massed in our large cities." It urged, therefore, that the General Assembly of the church, without lowering the educational standards for the ministry, should devise a plan for "laborers of less complete and elaborate culture to meet the present and increasingly imperative need of these exceptional populations."⁶ In similar spirit the Inter-Denominational Congress in the Interest of City Evangelization met in Cincinnati in December, 1885, and discussed socialism, evangelistic work in the cities, Christian work for the foreign born and similar topics. At this meeting Washington Gladden spoke on "Church Neglect as Caused by the Strife Between Labor and Capital," while Richard T. Ely read a paper on "Socialism." Mr. Gladden emphasized in particular the fear that the church was losing the workingman. As an example he cited his church. He believed that laboring men comprised about one fourth of the population of the country, but revealed that his church, which had free pews and a democratic spirit, had in the congregation only about ten per cent who were workingmen.⁷

In 1886 Baptist leaders met for their fifth annual Congress for the Discussion of Current Questions. At the evening session of November 16 the Rev. P. S. Moxom of Boston and the Hon. James Buchanan of Trenton, N. J., read papers on the labor question. Mr. Moxom announced his belief that the spirit of *laissez-faire* was "heartless and selfish." He thought that the discontent of the laborers was sometimes selfish, but that it was also prophetic. The surprising thing was that the awakening of the laborers had been so conservative and so little disposed to violent and revolutionary action.⁸

5 *Christian Advocate* (New York), February 18, 1886.

6 Annual Meeting, Second Day, April 13, 1886, in the Sixth Presbyterian Church, *Record of Chicago Presbytery* (MS), IV, 111-112.

7 *Discussions of the Inter-Denominational Congress in the Interest of City Evangelization, Held in Cincinnati, December 7-11, 1885* (Cincinnati, 1886), 124-137.

8 *Fifth Annual Session of the Baptist Congress for the Discussion of Current Questions, Held at the Eutaw Place Baptist Church, Baltimore, Md., November 16th, 17th and 18th, 1886* (New York, 1887), 43-48.

At the same session of the Congress the Rev. G. T. Dowling of Cleveland declared that "the leaguings together of the working men is one of the most hopeful signs of our times." He qualified his praise of unions, however, by announcing that they must learn that their chief end was not to strike. He foresaw the day when the wage system might be replaced by some form of industrial partnership.⁹

Often the sentiment at such meetings of religious leaders was unfriendly to labor unions.¹⁰ But the general interest in the question of capital and labor was clear. Thus, at the fiftieth anniversary of Union Theological Seminary, New York City, on May 11, 1886, President Hitchcock read before the alumni association a paper on Christian Socialism.¹¹ At the commencement of the Yale Divinity School in the same year the theme was "The Relation of the Ministry to Socialism,"¹² while on March 30 and 31, 1886, Dr. Behrends gave lectures at Hartford Seminary on the subject of the rights of labor and the responsibilities of wealth.¹³ In Chicago the Presbyterian Social Union held forums on the labor problem,¹⁴ while at a meeting of Baptist ministers in the same city George A. Schilling and other labor leaders were invited to present the workers' side of the labor question.¹⁵ On May 26, moreover, the delegates at the American Congress of Churches, meeting in Cleveland, heard addresses on the subject, "The Workingmen's Distrust of the Church; Its Causes and Remedies." Henry George and John Jarrett, a Pittsburgh labor leader, were among the speakers.¹⁶

This interest of churchmen in the workingman was not lost upon the labor press. *The Journal of United Labor*, al-

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59; *Inter-Denominational Congress 1885*, 8-15. See also the paper of William E. Weeden on "Arbitration and Its Relation to Strikes," *Official Report of the Twelfth Meeting of the National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches, Held at Saratoga, N. Y., September 20-24, 1886* (New York, 1886), 134-135.

¹¹ *New York Daily Tribune*, May 12, 1886; *Standard* (Chicago), May 20, 1886.

¹² H. F. Farnam, "The Clergy and the Labor Question," in *New Princeton Review*, II, 48 (July, 1886). Mr. Farnam feared that an interest in the workers, particularly when "reinforced by strong sympathies," had its pitfalls. He thought that too many clergymen and too many religious papers denounced the industrial system, advocated profit-sharing as the laborer's due, and said that monarchy in industry and democracy in politics were incompatible.

¹³ *Congregationalist* (Boston), April 15, 1886.

¹⁴ *Interior* (Chicago), March 18, 1886.

¹⁵ *Our Country* (New York), April 17, 1886.

¹⁶ *Christian Union* (New York), June 3, 1886; *New York Tribune*, May 25, 1886.

though not openly hostile to organized religion, had its cynical moments, and declared on May 25, 1886, that the labor question was "proving to be a mine of wealth to the pulpit, which has now struck the vein and is working it for 'all it is worth.' " The labor problem, in other words, had become the fashion. The editor stated, however, that the church's interest in this question had come too late "to inspire us with great faith in its genuineness." He was glad, nevertheless, to see the ministers repeat "what we workingmen reiterated twenty years ago." The pulpit, in other words, gave some signs that it was learning.¹⁷

Another influential labor journal, *John Swinton's Paper*, also found occasion to criticize certain clergymen for their views on labor. In particular, this paper took pains to heap ridicule on "Bread-and-Water-Beecher" and his reactionary sermons.¹⁸ It also cited a labor discussion among members of the Congregational Club of New York City, and declared that the general conclusion of the discussion seemed to be that the solution of the labor problem depended upon the conversion of the rich employers. The editor commented that in such a case the problem would not be solved until Gabriel blew his horn.¹⁹ Like the *Journal of United Labor*, however, *John Swinton's Paper* praised ministers whom it thought to be friends of the workingman, and on November 14, 1886, congratulated three clergymen upon their election to Congress. Each of these men was friendly to labor. Unfortunately, however, the Rev. Jesse Jones, who was a Master Workman of the Knights of Labor, had failed of election.²⁰

In recognition of clerical interest in the problems of the workingman many labor papers reprinted sermons and addresses which showed sympathy for the worker.²¹ *The Laborer*, moreover, quoted a letter which the Rev. E. Fales of Palestine, Texas, had sent to the *Congregationalist*. Mr. Fales wrote in defense of the Knights of Labor who were then striking against

17 *The Journal of United Labor* (Philadelphia), May 25, 1886. This paper reflected the views of the Knights of Labor.

18 *John Swinton's Paper* (New York), June 13, 1886.

19 *Ibid.*, May 23, 1886.

20 *Ibid.*, November 14, 1886.

21 *The Laborer* (Haverhill, Marlboro and Brockton, Mass.), May 15, 1886; *Knights of Labor* (Chicago), May 22, November 20, 1886; *Weekly Labor Bulletin* (Decatur, Ill.), April 22, September 30, 1886; *Workman* (Cleveland), May 1, 8, 22, 1886.

the Gould system of railroads in the southwest. Mr. Fales declared that the railroads paid the workers poorly, that saloon keepers had no use for members of the Knights of Labor, and that the Knights were not guilty of disorderly conduct. In fact, although hundreds of deputies were present, there had been no disorder. Mr. Fales added that his Sunday School superintendent, one deacon and one trustee were members of the Knights of Labor.²²

Under the caption "A Reverend Striker," the *Knights of Labor* announced that the Rev. John Johnson of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Monongahela City, Pa., was in the Allegheny County workhouse for eight months for rioting and inciting to riot. Mr. Johnson had preached to the people near Coal Center, had then worked in the mines and had joined a strike in the fall of 1885. The miners liked him, and made him their spokesman during the strike. He was now in jail for his part in helping to keep "blacklegs" from working abandoned mines.²³

Often critical and sometimes appreciative of the clergy's interest in unions, strikes, and boycotts, the labor press reflected the concern which religious leaders were showing in the problems of capital and labor.

The many strikes in 1886 and the rapid growth of the Knights of Labor focused attention upon the strike as a means of redressing grievances and upon the desirability of having a powerful union as the spokesman for labor. And to these questions the religious press gave much attention. On the surface the religious press showed a surprising friendliness for the Knights of Labor and for Terence V. Powderly, the Grand Master Workman of the Order. Yet the value of this sympathy for the Knights of Labor was qualified by criticism of the methods by which this organization tried to improve the conditions of the workingmen. The religious journals, on the whole, accepted the right of laborers to organize, but condemned the use of the strike or boycott. In particular, they condemned attempts by labor unions to interfere with the "freedom of contract" of those workers who did not wish to join labor organizations nor to strike.

²² *Laborer*, April 24, 1886.

²³ *Knights of Labor*, July 17, 1886.

The *Christian Advocate* stated that each worker had a right to choose to whom he would apply for work, and the right to accept or to reject the wages offered. The worker might ask for better wages and had the right to quit if the raise in wages were not granted. Workers, moreover, had the right to organize for "instruction, mutual interest and helpfulness, or for any other purpose," and had the privilege of persuading others to join their organization. But workers also had the right to refuse to join such organizations.²⁴ In common with many religious journals the *Christian Advocate* thought strikes to be folly. It announced its sympathy for the workingmen who were the "bone and sinew" of the country as well as of the Methodist Episcopal Church, but declared at the same time its feeling for the employers, most of whom had raised themselves to high position through industry, thrift, and temperate habits.²⁵

The *Northwestern Christian Advocate* argued that laborers were forced to organize in order to combat effectively the combinations which employers had formed. The railroads, coal producers, iron and steel manufacturers, and other employers had combined to "obstruct competition and preserve prices from being reduced by the natural laws of production and distribution." The workingman had as good a right to organize in order to "neutralize as far as possible the injurious effects of capital combination." In fact, the workingman should organize: "There is more hope in the outcome than to leave mutual association all on the side of the employers."²⁶ In like spirit, the *Advance* stated that "In order to avoid being forced to accept terms dictated by the cupidity of employers, laborers found it necessary to organize."²⁷

The *Northwestern Christian Advocate* was somewhat more tolerant than other religious journals in its attitude toward strikes. Commenting that strikers were doing a brisk business, it announced that the victories of the cab-drivers and some other strikers had the approval of the public. People realized that strikes could not succeed without some coercion,

24 *Christian Advocate* (New York), April 29, 1886. This was a Methodist publication.

25 *Ibid.*, June 17, 1886.

26 *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, March 31, 1886. This was a Methodist paper.

27 *Advance* (Chicago), June 3, 1886. This was a Congregationalist paper.

and so long as it was the street car companies that were involved the public did not seem to mind a certain amount of lawlessness. This paper warned, however, that violence should be taken only in small amounts. Strikes and boycotts were dangerous to the cause of labor because they were likely in the end to alienate public opinion.²⁸ The *Advance* joined in warning labor that strikes were harmful, and declared that the denial to non-union men of the right to work was wrong.²⁹

One editor declared that he believed thoroughly in labor unions, announced that organizations of working men could do much good if conducted upon just principles, yet stated that many unions were characterized by despotism.³⁰ The *Christian Oracle* agreed that labor had the right to organize but condemned the coercion of non-union members. This paper criticized strikes and declared that men should be free to work if they cared to do so.³¹ In similar spirit the *Christian Evangelist* affirmed that organized labor became a "despotic monopoly" when it proscribed work for men who were not members of unions.³²

The *Churchman* made a flank attack by expressing its sympathy for the prison laborers who suffered because labor unions had ordered a boycott upon prison made goods. This demand that the prisoner should not work was an illustration of the "cruel savagery and selfishness of socialism." In even more cynical spirit this paper announced that the Knights of Labor had taught the clergy a valuable lesson. The Knights, through their declaration that they were ready to forward one hundred thousand dollars to support a strike, had taught that no member of their organization could, without "absolute impertinence," pretend to be dependent upon charity. The church, therefore, could "rule them out" of its charitable work.³³

Occasionally a religious paper expressed the belief that

28 *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, March 24, 1886.

29 *Advance*, June 3, 1886.

30 *Christian Register* (Boston), May 20, 1886. See also, March 11, 1886. This paper was Unitarian.

31 *Christian Oracle* (Des Moines, Iowa), April 15, 1886. This was a Disciples of Christ paper.

32 *Christian Evangelist* (St. Louis), February 25, 1886. This was a Disciples of Christ paper.

33 *Churchman* (New York), May 1, 1886. For support of this idea, see the *Living Church* (Chicago), May 8, 1886. Both of these papers were Protestant Episcopal.

the workingman could best "work out his own salvation" without the help of labor organizations.³⁴ The general attitude of the religious press, however, was that labor unions might be useful, but that they were damaging their cause and injuring the "free laborer" through coercion in strikes and boycotts.³⁵

The religious papers often criticized local and district leaders of the Knights of Labor, particularly when those leaders used the strike or the boycott to gain their ends. Yet the religious press was largely agreed in its approval of Terence V. Powderly, Grand Master Workman of the Knights of Labor. The consensus of these journals was that Powderly was a conservative leader under whose guidance the Knights might follow a moderate, non-violent course of action. Powderly, for example, had declared that with proper organization "aided by a powerful conservative labor press, there [was] nothing in reason" that labor could not have. Strikes, lock-outs, and boycotts would become a thing of the past if labor would learn "coolly and deliberately [to] weigh every question as it should be weighed."³⁶

The *Western Christian Advocate* believed that conditions would be all right if the Knights followed Powderly's advice. But the Grand Master Workman, unfortunately, did not seem to exercise control over many of the local assemblies of the Knights.³⁷ The *Christian Leader* thought Powderly to be a man of ability and practical foresight. He was handicapped, however, because many local officers in the Knights of Labor were undisciplined and given to precipitate action.³⁸ The *Independent*, in its turn, announced its belief that Powderly was a moderate, sensible leader, but that his "satraps" were foolish and domineering.³⁹ In similar spirit, other religious journals described Powderly as a responsible leader who was

34 *Zion's Herald*, May 5, 1886.

35 *Herald and Presbyter* (Cincinnati), April 7, May 12, 1886; *Standard* (Chicago), March 18, 1886; *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate* (Pittsburgh), April 1, May 6, 1886; *Western Christian Advocate* (Cincinnati), March 24, June 16, 1886; *Christian Advocate* (New York), May 20, 1886; *United Presbyterian* (Pittsburgh), March 25, April 22, 1886; *Presbyterian Banner* (Pittsburgh), March 17, May 19, 1886; *Congregationalist*, April 1, 1886; *Interior*, April 15, 1886; *Christian Leader* (Boston), April 15, 1886; *Christian Register*, March 11, 1886.

36 *Journal of United Labor*, February 25, 1886.

37 *Western Christian Advocate*, May 26, 1886.

38 *Christian Leader*, April 1, 1886.

39 *Independent*, March 25, 1886.

handicapped by turbulent and hotheaded men among the ranks of lesser officials.⁴⁰

Powderly commended himself particularly to the editors of religious journals because of his condemnation of liquor. Both Powderly and the *Journal of United Labor* were zealous in advocating temperance among workingmen. The *Journal*, for example, quoted approvingly a plea that the laborers should "Leave Whiskey Alone," and that they should follow the example of the sainted founder of the Knights, Uriah S. Stephens. Workers should leave whiskey drinking to "rich drones and idlers."⁴¹ Powderly, moreover, made more stringent the rule forbidding liquor dealers to join the Knights, and declared that if a member's wife sold liquor he should divorce her or the organization. Recognizing that some organizers for the Knights were accused of excessive drinking, he declared that he could "assure the man who drinks that he never will represent the present Grand Master Workman except when sober." In his choice of organizers, moreover, Powderly required affirmative answer to the question: "Will you carefully exclude lawyers, bankers, gamblers, loafers, professional politicians and rumsellers of all grades, from the meeting before you organize an Assembly, and caution them against the admission of all such persons. . .?"⁴²

Consequently, the *Advance* declared that Powderly and some other leaders of the Knights were "wise and honest" in their purpose, and praised the Grand Master Workman for his counselling the Knights to be moderate in the matter of strikes, and for his renouncing the boycott, except that against strong drink.⁴³ The *Independent* printed Frances Willard's article on "A Christian Woman's View of the Labor Movement" in which she praised Powderly and his lieutenants for taking the vows of total abstinence. She stated, moreover, that the Knights, in asking for women equal pay for equal work, were showing themselves to be "Knights of the new chivalry."⁴⁴ The *Standard* added its voice to those approving

40 *Interior*, April 8, 1886; *Christian Evangelist*, April 22, 1886; *Central Christian Advocate*, April 14, 1886; *Pittsburgh Christian Advocate*, April 1, 1886; *Advance*, May 13, 1886.

41 *Journal of United Labor*, December 25, 1886.

42 *Journal of United Labor*, February 10, 1886.

43 *Advance*, May 13, 1886.

44 *Independent*, December 23, 1886.

Powderly, and described him as a "public benefactor" who was using his influence with laborers to develop correct habits of living which promised to secure more for them than strikes or boycotts.⁴⁵ And the *Northwestern Christian Advocate* praised the Knights for their stand on the liquor question, adding that if all members of the order were temperate they would seldom have to strike, and if they did strike, would usually win.⁴⁶ No friend of labor unions, *Zion's Herald* declared that the laborer, by living in ignorance and vice, was his own oppressor and had in his own hands the power to better his condition far more than he could through joining unions and getting wage increases. Wage increases, in other words, would not be needed if workers stopped spending their money for drink, or if housewives read cook books and household guides instead of sensational stories.⁴⁷

Years later Powderly wrote that many leading prohibitionists in the years around 1886 sought his influence to further their cause. But he soon decided that "a more detestable set of hypocrites did not exist." Their argument, he discovered, was that men could afford to work for lower pay if they did not spend so much money for drink.⁴⁸ Powderly, however, had high praise for Frances Willard and believed that the saloon was one of the worst enemies of the workingman.⁴⁹

In spite of occasional friendliness the forces of organized religion and labor looked on each other with suspicion. Laboring men sometimes expressed their aspirations in religious phraseology. Thus, one wrote: "Our father, who sits in Scranton, Pa., T. V. Powderly is thy name, may thy principles of justice rule and govern this government . . . Lead us not in the way of monopoly, but deliver us from the Republican and Democratic parties, and thine shall be power and the glory and honor, Amen."⁵⁰ In similar spirit a member of the Knights spoke of God as the "great Master Workman of this Universe."⁵¹ Labor, however, showed no expectancy of receiving

⁴⁵ *Standard*, May 20, 1886.

⁴⁶ *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, April 14, 1886.

⁴⁷ *Zion's Herald*, January 13, 1886.

⁴⁸ *The Path I Trod: the Autobiography of Terence V. Powderly*, ed. by Harry J. Carman, Henry David and Paul N. Guthrie (New York, 1940), 190.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 388-389; 364.

⁵⁰ *Journal of United Labor*, September 25, 1886.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1885.

much support from organized religion in its struggle to better the position of the workingman.

Religious leaders, in their turn, particularly as they expressed themselves through the religious press, were friendly to labor only within limits. They commended the Knights of Labor and T. V. Powderly chiefly because they saw here hopes for a conservative labor movement which would subdue alike the demons of rum and of violence.

